

No Good Deed

by Tanaqui

Heather's eyes fluttered open, her senses reaching out in the darkness for whatever had woken her.

The room was no longer lit by the street-lamp two houses down—they couldn't spare the electricity since Hoffman cut power into town—and she could make out nothing beyond the lighter patch of the window. Then a floorboard creaked, and she realized she could hear someone breathing raggedly over the blood pumping in her own ears. She froze. *Someone's in the room with me!*

Another floorboard complained as whoever it was put their weight on it. The sound came from closer to the bed, and she smelled a man's sweat and something of the outdoors. Panic flooded through her, rendering her immobile: what should she do? What *could* she do?

Another creak from the floorboards, and then a work-roughened hand clamped across her mouth. She instinctively reacted, trying to fight her hands from under the sheets, but her assailant knelt next to her, his weight holding down the bedclothes, and she thrashed helplessly.

A voice was saying, "Don't make a noise. Heather. Please. Don't...." and she realized she recognized it, and she fought even harder, because it was: *Russell. He's here to collect the bounty. He's going to kill me!*

"Heather? Heather?" Russell was getting more insistent, and she wondered why he was even bothering to talk to her and hadn't just slit her throat already. Unless he had orders to take her back to Constantino's ranch.

She bucked even harder, but it was useless. He was too strong....

"Heather? It's okay." He was still talking to her, but her mind couldn't make sense of what he was saying. All she could do was try and fight, and fail, and know she was going to die. "Heather, I'm not here to hurt you. Please just be quiet, okay?" He was leaning over her, his face close to hers, and the panic in his voice and what he was saying finally began to sink in. She stared up at him, wide-eyed, suddenly too weak to fight him any more.

His grip slackened a little as she quieted underneath him. "I'm not here to hurt you," he repeated in a whisper. He took his hand away from her mouth and she gasped for air. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you."

He sat back, letting her finally get her arms free. She pushed herself up and scooted back up the bed away from him, clutching the neck of her pajamas. "Then why are you here?" she hissed, her voice shaking.

"I need your help." He scrubbed a hand across his face, and she could hear the weariness in his voice. "Things are bad in New Bern, Heather. Constantino's back to his old tricks. Anyone who crosses him, or stands up to him. Heck, if you just look at him the wrong way. If he knew I was here...."

Scrabbling for the candle on the nightstand, Heather lit it. The unsteady yellow glow was enough to

show her how ragged Russell looked. She wasn't sure she could entirely forgive him for scaring her witless, but she guessed he wasn't thinking too straight right now. Even the mention of Constantino's name was enough to send a chill down her own spine.

She set the candle down and turned back to him. "What can I do?"

He took a deep breath, clearly trying to steady himself. "My wife and kids are stashed in a barn just inside the line of the New Bern patrols." He swallowed. "I need your help to get them out. Jericho's help. I think Constantino's starting to have doubts about me, and you know what he'd do to them...." His voice cracked.

Heather's mind drifted back to her time back in New Bern. Russell's wife had been kind: inviting her to dinner, making sure she had some of the essentials she'd needed after it became apparent her stay in New Bern would last more than a few days. And she'd enjoyed spending time with his children; after it became impossible to keep the Jericho schools open over the winter, she hadn't seen much of her pupils, and she'd missed being around them..

She felt like she owed Russell and his family something. Reaching out a hand, she touched his arm gently. "I'll do what I can. But after all that's happened—" She was thinking about how Russell had come for Goetz; how he'd been caught by Beck, and given up Stanley so easily.... Part of the blame for what Beck did to Jericho and Jake lay on his shoulders. She bit her lip. "I'm sorry, Russell, but I'm not sure anyone in Jericho is going to care. Not enough to risk trying to get someone out."

He nodded. "I know. But I have information about what Constantino's up to; stuff he's planning to do to make trouble for Jericho and for Beck. It's all going down in the next couple of days. Help me get my family out, and I'll tell Jericho everything."

He was looking directly at her, and she couldn't detect any guile in his expression. "Okay." She licked her lips. "I'll take you to see Eric. He's the sheriff now. Umm." She blushed. "Would you mind waiting in the other room while I get dressed?"

oOo

Ten minutes later, Heather was leading Russell to the side entrance of Bailey's, the one that led to the apartment upstairs. Eric answered the door, gun in one hand, flashlight in the other.

"Heather?" Eric lowered the flashlight; when her eyes recovered from being blinded, she saw that Mary stood behind him on the stairs with a shotgun. Heather couldn't help but wonder if she was being foolish—naïve, to use Edward's word—in not keeping a gun at home, but she'd never felt comfortable handling them. She'd rather they were in the hands of people who knew what they were doing. People like Eric, and Jake....

She pushed the thought aside and stepped sideways, so Eric could see Russell standing a few paces away. "I brought someone to see you."

Eric's eyes narrowed. Before Heather could say another word, he had both flashlight and gun trained on the other man. "What the—? What's *he* doing here?"

Heather automatically reached to put her hand on the gun and force it down but stopped short, afraid she might accidentally make Eric shoot Russell instead. "He's here to help." She glanced back at Russell and saw he'd raised his hands and was blinking into the light.

"Help?" Eric's voice rose. "We've seen the kind of help New Bern wants to give us."

Russell took a pace forwards. "And you'll see a heck of a lot more of it if you don't put that gun down and listen to me."

Eric kept the gun leveled at Russell. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Constantino's planning an attack on Jericho." Russell half lowered his hands. "Now, you can listen to me and find out about it tonight, or you can shoot me and find out about it after Constantino's done his worst. Assuming you're still alive."

Heather saw the uncertainty in Eric's eyes as he tried to decide if Russell was telling the truth. "Eric, please—" His gaze flicked to her and she caught and held it. "He's not here on Constantino's orders. He's—trust me, he's not. Please, hear him out."

Eric looked back at Russell, his gaze hardening for a moment, and then he took a deep breath and lowered the gun. "Okay. But this had better be good."

oOo

A short while later, the four of them were settled in one of the booths in the main bar, Eric listening to Russell repeat what he'd already told Heather. Heather noticed that, while Eric rested his gun on the table, he didn't let go of it.

When Russell was done, Eric gave him a skeptical look. "So, we get your family out, and you tell us all about this mystery plan Constantino has to cause chaos in Jericho?"

Russell shrugged. "If I tell you the plan first, what's to say you won't just throw me in jail and leave my family to get caught by Constantino?"

Eric gave him a hard stare, his fingers tightening on the pistol's grip. "The fact that I'm Jericho's sheriff and not New Bern's?" He relaxed and shook his head. "Anyway, it's not my call. I'll need to talk to Gray and the others in the morning."

Russell's hand shot forward and he pinned Eric's wrist to the table. "I can't wait that long." A pained expression crossed his face. "My family can't wait that long. You need to go get them now."

Eric shook Russell's hand off. "I still need to talk to the others." He paused and Heather saw his expression soften. Maybe the fear on Russell's face and in his voice when he spoke about his family had finally convinced him. "Okay. I get it. I guess we need to go bang on a few doors and wake some more people up."

Russell sat back, letting out the breath he'd been holding. "Thank you."

"Yeah, well," Eric scratched his chin and looked away, "don't thank me until you've heard what they have to say." He sighed. "Most of them are pretty close by, but someone'll need to get Jake from the ranch."

"I can do that," Heather volunteered. "I can take Charlotte. Shouldn't take more than half an hour or so to fetch him."

Eric nodded. "Okay. Mary, you run along to The Pines and get Gray. Chavez and Davies too, if

they'll come. I'll take Russell and swing by Jimmy's and Bill's, have them round up some of the Rangers. And I guess I should get on the horn at City Hall and invite Beck to the party, too. He'll want to hear this."

oOo

The rattle of Charlotte's engine was loud in the quiet night as Heather made her way north on Route 6 towards the Green ranch. She wasn't surprised when Jake answered the door almost immediately at her knock: he must have heard her coming from a mile away. She found herself on the wrong end of his Beretta, but he quickly pulled it up when he saw who it was.

"Heather. What are you doing here?" He stepped back, opening the door wider to let her in.

"Eric sent me for you." As she followed him into the house, she noted absently that he apparently hadn't had time to do more than grab the gun: he was dressed in nothing more than boxer shorts, his feet bare and his hair tousled. "Russell, from New Bern, turned up at my house—."

He'd found a flashlight and turned it on, standing it on end on the table so it cast a glow over the center of the room. As he swung back towards her, the harsh light emphasized his scars, white against his lightly tanned skin.

"Are you okay?" He took a step closer, reaching out a hand. She dragged her gaze up to his face and waved him off.

"I'm fine. Russell came to tell us that New Bern," she shook her head and corrected herself, "that Constantino is planning an attack on Jericho. And to ask for our help getting his family out. Eric's getting everyone together at Bailey's to decide what to do."

Jake let out a harsh sigh of frustration and turned his head away in annoyance. "Constantino! I might have known." He turned back to Heather, and this time he did step closer and rest his hand on her arm. "You really okay?"

She tipped her head back up to meet his gaze, feeling the heat from his skin, and breathing in his musky scent. She noticed he no longer wore the dog-tag he'd had on when she'd walked in on him finishing up showering all those months ago. She blushed at the memory of babbling like a baboon, of what an idiot she'd been in those first few weeks she'd known him. She gently disengaged herself from his grip and took a step back. "I'm fine." She shrugged. "Russell gave me a bit of a scare, is all."

A cold breeze snuck its way in through the open door, chilling her. In the dim pre-dawn light, she saw Jake shiver.

"We should get back to town," she reminded him.

"Yeah. I—." He realized he was still holding the gun and put it down on the table. "Sorry if I scared you as well. I, uh, I'll get dressed."

When he came back, he was wearing a T-shirt, jeans and boots. He picked up the gun, checked the magazine absently, and shoved the gun into the waistband at the back of his jeans, before scooping up a set of car keys.

"Umm, I came in Charlotte." Heather gestured outside.

Despite the dim light, she could see his grin. "No offense, but the Roadrunner's a lot more reliable. I'd hate to break down somewhere between here and town."

oOo

Chavez sipped a cup of coffee as he, Mack and Gray waited for the rest of the group to gather. While Mary's coffee wasn't quite as good as the beans he'd brought to Jericho—almost gone, he'd have to see if he could get that kid, Dale, to smuggle in some more—it wasn't bad. He'd drunk a lot worse in joints like this while he waited for bad news.

Mary had been able to give them only the sketchiest details of why Russell was in town, but had filled in the little background she knew about him. Not that she was a gossip; far from it. But she ran a bar, and Chavez knew she was damn good at it. The two of them had spent a few entertaining evenings in the first weeks after he'd arrived in town with her trying to wheedle a little personal information out of him, and him doing his best to charm her while stonewalling her inquiries. She'd learned from somewhere—Jake or Heather, he guessed—that he liked a good cup of coffee, and now she came by for a second pass with the coffee pot.

She was interrupted in pouring his refill by the clatter of the front door heralding the return of Eric, with Beck and Bill in tow, and a fourth man who must be this Russell. Chavez spared a glance for Beck—did the man ever look anything but his usual unruffled self?—and then concentrated on taking his measure of the fugitive from New Bern.

He saw a man who looked much like any of the men in Jericho who worked the salt mines, although Chavez didn't think the scars on Russell's face, revealed as he took off the cap he'd been wearing, had come from one too many bar brawls. He also seemed reluctant to meet anyone's eye, even Gray and Mary as he greeted them, and he thrummed with nervous energy. Chavez wondered if it was concern for his family, or something else.

Jimmy hurried in soon afterwards, clutching a half dozen rolled up maps. Then the door rattled again, this time admitting Jake and Heather. Jake acknowledged his brother and Gray with a quick nod, and Beck with a longer and colder stare. Chavez noticed Heather kept close to Jake as they crossed to where the group had gathered, and that Jake ushered her onto a stool and made sure Mary brought her coffee. Could just be common courtesy or could be—heck, Chavez didn't know: he'd been watching them for more than a month, and he still couldn't figure out what Jake thought he was playing at where Heather Lisinski was concerned.

Eric cleared his throat and Chavez turned his attention to the younger of the Green brothers while Eric began to introduce Russell and explain his presence.

Chavez had been a little surprised on his return to Jericho to discover that Gray had appointed Eric as sheriff. Not that he'd had much time to get to know Eric during his brief weeks masquerading as Parker, but he'd seemed all hat and no cattle: a man living in his father's shadow in more ways than one. How much that had been grief, and how much of all that had happened afterwards had changed him, Chavez didn't know. He did know that since he'd been appointed sheriff, Eric had apparently done a good job getting the Rangers back in place, getting them organized, and keeping Jericho as safe as could be expected in the face of a surrounding hostile force.

Eric now waved Russell forward to say his piece, and Chavez turned his attention back to the reason they were all there. Russell held his cap in his hands as he spoke, turning it and turning it, almost

like he was praying a rosary.

"Most of you know what Constantino's capable of." Russell looked around at them, his gaze lingering on Heather. Her face was tense and Chavez saw her hands were clasped tightly in her lap. She gave Russell a slight nod, and he seemed to take it as encouragement to carry on speaking. "I'm not proud of letting him get away with some of the things he did. Of not standing up to him. Of even helping him sometimes. But I had my family to think of. Mostly I was just trying to do the best I could for them. I guess I still am."

Again he looked around at them. "I'm not going to lie. I'm not here because I want to help Jericho. I'm here because I want to keep my family safe. And they're not safe any more. Since Constantino took charge again, things are even worse than they were before. There's things he's doing...." He laughed bitterly. "Trust me, I'm not a good enough liar I can pretend I'm okay with them any more. Constantino never really trusted me anyway, but now...." Chavez saw him swallow.. "I need to get my family out."

"And if we help you, you'll tell us about this trouble Constantino's planning for Jericho." Gray's skeptical tone matched Chavez's own mood.

Russell nodded. "It's Independence Day in a couple of days. Constantino reckons you'll all be celebrating it." His tone turned bitter and he grimaced. "New Bern won't be. We have something called America Day, now we're in the Allied States. In April."

Gray snorted. "The day Tomarchio renamed the country. On Stanley Richmond's front porch."

Russell nodded. "Anyway, Constantino's looking to give you the worst Fourth of July ever, and Hoffman's letting him do it. Seems he's tired of sitting on his ass waiting for you to surrender while his bosses in Cheyenne yell at him. I don't know all the details, but I know enough to tell you how you can spoil Constantino's party. But you have to get my family out first. I've got them hidden in a barn just inside New Bern's patrol lines, but the longer they're there, the more chance of them getting discovered."

Chavez saw Jake and Eric exchange a look. Without consulting Gray—which Chavez had learned in the last month was pretty much standard operating procedure around here—Eric said, "Jimmy, why don't you get the maps and have Russell show you where his family is? Then we can make some plans."

"Sure thing." Jimmy nodded and led Russell over to the pool table, where the maps he'd brought in had been stacked. Gray, Bill and Mack followed, but Eric indicated with a tilt of his head that the rest of them should step away. He stopped when he reached the other side of the bar.

"How can we know he's telling the truth?" He kept his voice low, darting a glance at where Russell was holding down a corner of a map and pointing something out on it while Jimmy frowned. "For all we know, this could be a trap to lure some of us to New Bern and get us killed."

Jake nodded. "The thought had crossed my mind."

Chavez had caught an inquiring glance from Mack when he'd looked over at the pool table, but he shook his head: *you keep an eye on them over there, and I'll look after this end*. He leaned back against the bar and crossed his arms. "How well do you know this man?"

"Russell?" Jake shrugged. "He's been a good friend to us in the past. He's loyal to New Bern, but I

know he hasn't been happy with what Constantino's been up to for months. And he did try to stop things escalating into an all-out conflict when Constantino was preparing for war."

"I don't think it's a trap." When the four men and Mary, who'd followed them round on the other side of the bar, turned to look at her, Heather smiled nervously. "He got into my bedroom, remember? If he'd wanted to kill me, wanted to kill any of us, he could have done it easily enough." She gave a nervous laugh that was more like a hiccup. "Actually, I thought he *had* come to kill me."

Jake stiffened. "Why—?"

Heather held his gaze for a long moment, biting her lip as if debating whether to answer. At last she said quietly, "Constantino put a bounty on me."

"What?" Jake's exclamation made even Russell and Jimmy, on the far side of the bar, look up from the map for a moment. Chavez saw Jake swallow before he said in a more normal voice, "Why would he do that?"

Heather shrugged. "He found out I was acting as Edward's liaison. That I was the one providing the information that was helping cripple the resistance in New Bern. Russell told me about the bounty the night of the med center siege, when he came for Goetz." She looked over at Beck. "He asked me to stop helping you. I told him that whatever you were doing to stop Constantino, I wanted to be a part of it."

Beck inclined his head slightly. "Thank you."

Heather shook her head. "I wasn't—." She stopped and looked around at them and took a deep breath. "You don't know the half of what Constantino was up to. The things he did." She shuddered. "The things he's still doing."

"The executions?" Beck spoke softly, but his manner wasn't in the least gentle.

"What executions?" Jake swung round and glared at Beck.

Beck nodded at Heather. "That man from New Bern, the shooter you stopped on Main Street. Heather told me he carried out a number of executions on Constantino's orders." He pressed his lips together for a moment. "We found graves...."

Jake looked back at Heather, one eyebrow raised. She met his gaze and said flatly, "They were the lucky ones."

Chavez nodded to himself. He'd seen enough in other countries of what men with power and no conscience could do to know that might well be the truth. Never expected to run across it in small-town America—but then he'd never expected to be dealing with a coup d'état on home soil, either.

From their expressions, he knew Jake and Beck also had some idea what Heather was implying: both looked a little sickened. Eric and Mary looked more confused. Before either of them could ask Heather to elaborate, he jumped in to the conversation. "So... we're going to trust Russell... for now?"

Jake exchanged glances with Eric, and then nodded. "For now."

Jake led the group back over to the pool table. "So where're we at?"

"Uh." Jimmy gave him a nervous grin. "Russell's family's here." He pointed to a spot about four miles from the center of New Bern. "We thought we could take the back roads along here—" He traced a finger along the fine lines that marked the dirt tracks criss-crossing the farmland. "—and go on foot from here."

Jake ran his gaze across the map, remembering trips as a teenager with "packages" for Jonah, when avoiding state troopers and the local highway patrol had been the name of the game. If that had been all they had to contend with, Jimmy's route would have been fine. But these days....

He glanced up at Beck. "Hoffman runs regular helicopter sweeps for several miles back from his perimeter, right?"

Beck nodded.

"Then we'll have to stay off the roads most of the way." He rubbed the back of his neck as he pondered their options. "We'd be better going on horseback. Less likely to get stuck; less likely Hoffman's patrols will spot us; and we won't be any slower." It was his turn to point at the map. "Once we're past Hoffman's lines, we can follow the creek here, and then cut through here. There's some rough ground that'll give us cover most of the way."

He looked up at Eric, seeking his brother's approval.

Eric scrubbed a hand through his hair. "Hoffman won't expect anyone to be making the trip in daylight. We can move slowly during the day. Save the horses. Lay up until nightfall and then do the last couple miles on foot."

Jake nodded. "There's an old sawmill here where we can hide out. Jonah used to—" He checked himself. "It's a good place to wait for dark and leave the horses."

"How are you going to get behind Hoffman's lines?"

Beck's quiet question drew Jake's attention from the map. He glared at the major, who was standing with his arms folded, regarding him with an expression Jake could only classify as smug. "We'll manage," he said curtly. "Chavez, Mack and I got past near the whole damn AS Army on our way back here." He deliberately turned his back on Beck as he prepared to speak to Eric again.

"Talking of which—" Chavez pushed away from where he'd been leaning with his elbows resting against the bar. "I'd like to come along on this little expedition. You might need someone who's used to... eliminating the opposition without being noticed." He gave Jake a grin that lacked any humor.

"You can ride?" Jake quirked an eyebrow.

Chavez shrugged. "I can get by."

"OK. You're in." Jake looked over at Eric. "Russell needs to go, too. I'd suggest no more than four —."

"It's be a lot easier to get past Hoffman's patrols if they weren't there." Beck had taken a step

forward and was resting his hands on the edge of the pool table.

Jake swung back to look at him, eyes narrowed Beck obviously had some clever scheme up his sleeve. Ever since he'd stopped working for Cheyenne, he'd acted like Jericho couldn't do without him. Well, this was one time...

"What do you mean?" Eric beat Jake to a reply.

Beck shifted his attention past Jake for a moment, to Eric, before looking back at Jake. With a slight, despairing shake of his head, he looked down at the map. "Hoffman has one of his patrols making a sweep from here to here, and another covering this sector." He indicated two arcs on the map. "If my men engage them when they're at their furthest apart, your rescue party could slip through the middle. Any other troops Hoffman has behind his front line would probably be drawn away as well." He looked back up at Jake, one eyebrow raised.

Jake ground his teeth, reluctant to admit that Beck's suggestion was a good one. If Hoffman's patrols were kept busy, it would make things so much easier. Even so, he wanted to turn him down, to let him know that they could manage on their own. He glanced around to see if the others would fall in line, and met Heather's gaze. She looked at him unhappily, silently reminding him of his promise to her to try and work with Beck.

Biting down on his annoyance, he turned back to the major and dipped his head. "That would help. Thanks."

Beck shifted his attention back to Eric. "If you have the horses brought out to Camp Delaware...."

Eric nodded. "I'll radio Randall and have him bring some up from the checkpoint on 122 and the lookout post on Cherry Valley Road." He rubbed his chin. "We should keep the party small. Russell, Chavez... Hank Jackson. He knows the country out that way and he's pretty handy on a horse. Me...."

Jake had turned back to studying the map, confirming in his mind the route along which he'd lead the rescue party, while Eric went on talking. Now he snapped his head up. "You? No. You can't leave town. You're the sheriff." He waved at the map. "I should be the one to go."

Eric shook his head. "I need you here to prepare for whatever Constantino's going to throw at us. And in case we don't make it back."

"Isn't that your job?" Jake squared up to his brother, crossing his arms and glaring at him.

Eric shoved his hands into his jeans pockets and smiled wryly. "I wasn't the one who led them after dad died. The town needs you here, Jake."

"You're the one in charge of the Rangers now—."

"And you're the one who stopped me doing this three months ago. Now it's time." He took a step closer to Jake. "It's my right to go."

Jake shook his head in disgust. "Right be damned. You could get yourself killed out there."

"And you couldn't?"

"Boys?" Mary's quiet question was lost in Jake telling Eric that wasn't the point and Eric telling Jake he needed to grow up. "Boys!" That got their attention. They both turned to her as she held out a hand with two straws poking out of it.

Jake raised an eyebrow and then gave a short bark of laughter. "It's as good a way as any." He looked back at Eric, who was rolling his eyes. "Short straw goes?"

Eric puffed out his cheeks, and then nodded. "You pick first."

Jake reached out and pulled one of the straws from Mary's hand. He turned his head away in disgust as a full-length straw emerged. Mary opened her hand to show the shorter one left behind.

He looked back at Eric and saw his brother swallow nervously. He almost overruled him—straws be damned—but stopped himself. He'd be just as nervous if he'd picked the short straw: this wasn't some Boy Scout hike. And Eric could handle himself, while the town didn't need Jake acting like he didn't trust its sheriff to get the job done, just because the sheriff was also his little brother.

Even so, as Eric prepared to leave with Russell, Chavez and Beck to make the arrangements for the rescue party, Jake pulled him to one side for a moment. "Take care, okay?"

Eric gave him a wry smile. "Always. You too. If we don't make it back...."

Jake shook his head. "You will. But we'll be ready for whatever Constantino tries to throw at us."

As he watched Eric and Beck walk out of Bailey's together, Jake allowed himself a small grin at the thought that Beck was being forced to aid and abet much the same party that he'd stopped heading to New Bern nearly three months ago.

Once Eric and the others had left, he got Jimmy to unroll a map of town, and those remaining in the bar settled down to working out how to get everybody into shelters or basements if Constantino used mortars again, where to station fire marshalls, and how they should increase the patrols around the perimeter.

After a while, he noticed Heather, standing next to him, yawning. "Hey." He touched her arm. "You should go home and get some sleep."

"I'm okay." She stifled another yawn with the back of her hand.

"No, you're not. You've been up most of the night. You had a bad scare." He glanced around at the rest of them. "I don't know about you guys, but I could do with some fresh air." He turned back to Heather. "I'll walk you home."

"That's—." She started to object, but he gave her a stern look; she shut her mouth and nodded reluctantly.

They didn't speak until they were halfway down Main Street, passing the alley that led to the back of the pharmacy. He was remembering how the same trip had been interrupted all those months ago by finding that man—what was his name? Victor?—with the radiation burns. So many deaths since then, and maybe more to come.....

"Do you really think Constantino will try to shell us?" Heather's question drew him from his thoughts.

He shrugged. "Maybe. Not going to be much of a Fourth of July party if Main Street's wrecked."

"What was it like last time?" He caught her glancing at him, but she looked away before he could meet her gaze.

"Being shelled?" His blood still ran cold at the memory of seeing his mom lying on the street, of crouching over her as the second mortar whistled in. "Scary."

They turned the corner into her street. Peering at her again out the corner of his eye, he saw she was biting her lip.

When they reached her house, she stopped and turned to face him. "I'm sorry...." She lifted her eyes and met his gaze. "I'm sorry I didn't manage to get away and warn you...."

He shook his head. "It wouldn't have made any difference. By the time you found out, it was too late anyway. I'm just glad," he swallowed, "just glad you did manage to get out of there. When Eric told me you were dead...." It still hurt to think about it, even when she was standing there in front of him, very much alive.

A blush crept up her cheeks—he realized she hadn't had time to put on the carefully applied make up he'd noticed her wearing more since she got back from New Bern—and she gave a nervous little chuckle. She turned her gaze away, letting it fall on the empty drive. "Oh." Again, a nervous laugh escaped her. "Charlotte...?"

"I'll run you back out to the ranch later to pick her up." He reached out and gave her arm a brief squeeze. "Now, go get some rest."

oOo

Heather had found it hard to fall sleep, tossing and turning while she worried about what Constantino was planning. Eventually, she dozed for a while, before starting awake at some noise outside. Late morning saw her back at Bailey's, not much more refreshed, but unable to sit at home waiting for news. Grabbing a coffee from the pot Mary must have had perking continuously since the early hours, she found herself a seat where she could watch the comings and goings in the bar. She saw Edward enter and stop just inside the door to scan the crowd. When he spotted her, he made a beeline for her.

"May I speak with you?"

Heather raised an eyebrow. He hadn't been this formal with her in a long while. It wasn't a good sign when he started acting like this: usually, it meant he was angry. Very angry. She wondered what she'd done to provoke him.

A little nervously, she gestured to the chair opposite and he sat, leaning forward, his hands clasped on the table in front of him. He spent a long moment studying her before he spoke.

"I wanted to apologize."

Again Heather's eyebrows shot up. "For what?"

"For putting you in so much danger as my liaison." Heather noticed his fingers were clenched

tightly, the knuckles white.

She shrugged slightly. "There's nothing to apologize for."

His expression suggested he wasn't buying that, but after a moment he relaxed and sat back, one hand resting flat on the table. "Why didn't you tell me about the bounty?"

"What was the point?"

Now it was his turn to look surprised. "I could have given you protection." His tone was fierce, and his fingers curled into a fist; Heather had a sudden vision of being accompanied everywhere by a dozen secret service men, ready to hustle her away from anyone who dared approach her.

"Do you think that would have stopped Constantino?" She tilted her head to one side. "When Russell told me about the bounty, we were in the middle of City Hall. If he'd wanted to kill me after that, he wouldn't have needed to get close enough to talk to me."

Edward was silent for a moment, considering her words, before he nodded reluctantly. "Even so. Why didn't you tell me?"

Heather picked up her coffee and sipped it, not looking at him. "I found out the night Goetz died. When you got back from New Bern, you had other things on your mind. And after that," she put the coffee down, but kept her gaze on the black liquid, "everything went to hell in a handbasket pretty quickly, didn't it?"

He was silent, and she supposed he was remembering all the things he'd done during that last week, when he thought he'd been imposing justice and upholding the law, only to discover he'd become the monster he'd believed he was fighting against. She wished they weren't talking about it, not with everything that had been stirred up by Russell's news: there were too many bad memories, for both of them.

When he did speak, his voice was soft, the formal edge gone. "Whatever else was going on, I would have made time for this."

Even though she wasn't looking at him, she could see out of the corner of her eye that he'd dipped his head, trying to catch her gaze. Reluctantly, she looked up at him.

He gave her one of his shy half-smiles. "I hope you know that."

She nodded, unable to speak. The depth of concern in his eyes surprised her—and unnerved her. He'd told her once that he tried to take care of the people under his charge, and she'd seen him put those words into action in small ways a dozen times. It was one of the reasons she'd quickly grown to respect him: underneath the stern exterior, he was a kind and compassionate man. Over the past few weeks, respect had turned into liking as they'd worked together as equals, helped along by those nights when he'd produced a bottle of scotch and opened up a little as they shared a drink. She'd discovered his dry sense of humor, and that he didn't mind being gently teased, after all, and that he worried about what he was leading his men into, and whether it was right to risk their lives on this cause.

The look on his face now was more than just dispassionate interest in her welfare. She hadn't seen him look so... vulnerable since he'd talked about his family: the wife he hadn't seen in six months, whose fate he still didn't know. She suddenly understood how lonely he must be, in this town full of

people who didn't much like him, leading officers who needed him to show no doubt. How much her friendship must matter.

She swallowed and found her voice. "I know."

She took another sip of her coffee. Silence fell between them, broken only by the quiet late-morning clatter of the bar and the bustle of people coming and going as news about Russell's arrival and Constantino's plans spread.

Edward cleared his throat. "Earlier. You said the people Constantino executed were the lucky ones."

Heather looked up at him and nodded.

"May I—?" He lowered his gaze briefly, and then raised it again, examining her face for a long moment. "May I ask what happened to the ones who weren't so lucky?"

Heather licked her lips. "Does it matter now?"

"Perhaps not. But I—." Again he hesitated. Then he leaned forward, hands clasped in front of him, and peered intently at her. "My bosses in Cheyenne told me when I came here that I was to end the conflict, prevent it from starting up again, and make finding the terrorist supposed to be in the area my top priority. They expected me to restore order, but without justice. No arrests. No tribunals." He shook his head slightly. "I did what I could, but taking away Constantino's badge didn't stop him from being New Bern's leader, and it didn't expose his crimes and make sure he was punished for them."

He looked at Heather unhappily. "I don't want to make you—." He stopped and swallowed and started again. "If it's too hard, you don't have to tell me. But I need to know what kind of monster I allowed to walk free."

Heather held his gaze, seeing the self-reproach in his expression and weighing the desire to offer him some comfort against her own wish not to talk about what it had been like. She'd tried hard to bury the awful truths she'd learned, and to forget the months of low-grade, continuous tension. For all they were now living under the shadow of Hoffman's attacks, she'd felt safer and freer this past month than she ever had in New Bern, and she'd known she could trust those around her to take care of her and to do the right thing. And because of that, she owed them—she owed Edward—the truth.

After a moment, she nodded, and he let out the breath he'd been holding in. He settled back, his hands clasped loosely one on top of the other on the table, and waited for her to begin.

Reluctant to start, she wrapped her hands around her coffee cup, and then realized the coffee had gone cold. Taking her hands away, she hugged herself, huddling back into her seat. She took a deep breath and glanced at him, briefly catching his eye before she looked away again.

"Some of this, I know for sure." She licked her lips. "Some of it I heard from other people, mostly after I was caught sabotaging the munitions factory."

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him nod, but he didn't speak.

She took another deep breath. "I think for the first month after the September attacks, things were much the same there as they were here. Then Goetz and his men arrived. Cleared the town out of

most of its supplies, and killed a half dozen guys who tried to stop them. Pretty soon, people in New Bern were starving and freezing, worse than we were."

She rubbed a hand up and down her arm, remembering how she'd never quite felt warm all through those long winter months. Dismissing the thought, she carried on talking.

"Everyone was supposed to pool their food for rationing, but people didn't want to give up what they had." She shook her head. "Neighbors started informing on each other, sometimes because they knew for sure that someone was hoarding, and sometimes just out of sheer spite. In the end, Constantino and his deputies went from house to house, confiscating anything they could find. It all went into a central store, to be rationed out."

Edward shifted a little, spreading his hands flat on the table. "Not exactly consistent with the fourth amendment, but understandable in the circumstances."

"Yeah." Heather shrugged slightly. "I guess that's what most people in New Bern thought. Seems things went quiet for a couple of weeks—until someone broke into the store and stole a lot of the food and gas." She looked up at Edward for a moment and caught him grimacing. She wondered briefly what he'd been doing at the time, and how Cheyenne had managed to keep the army fed. "Constantino rounded up a bunch of guys and put them in jail. They recovered some of the food. And things quieted down again."

Once more, she stopped. She could sense Edward was waiting for her to go on, but he let her find her own pace. She swallowed and carried on talking. "Except... the guys Constantino blamed for the theft were all men who'd stood up to him in some way. People he'd had a grudge against for a long time, or who'd objected when his deputies confiscated the food. Russell and I talked about it one time. He told me he saw the storage compound just after the break-in, and it looked like an inside job."

She looked up and met Edward's gaze. Disgust was written across his face. And they hadn't even reached the worst of it.

She leaned forward, resting her arms on the table and dropped her voice. "After that, any time someone objected to anything Constantino or his men did, they found themselves accused of acting against the town's interests in some way. Anyone who tried to leave town without Constantino's permission, as well. The patrols weren't just to keep trouble out of New Bern; they were to keep people in." She shrugged again. "It wasn't just men they carted off to jail: they took women, too. Sometimes the people had kids, and they'd just leave them to fend for themselves. Quickly got so's no one would speak out in case it happened to them."

The disgust on Edward's face had shifted to pity. "Understandable," he murmured.

"Yeah." Heather pressed her lips together, trying to compose herself to talk about the next part. The part she knew about from what she'd seen herself. Again, Edward waited patiently for her to speak. Again, she took another deep breath and carried on. "I found out later that most of them didn't stay in the jail very long. The ones that Constantino didn't trust not to make further trouble...." She stopped and looked down.

"They were the ones who were executed?" Edward supplied.

She nodded. "The rest.... There was a warehouse on the edge of town where they kept them."

She remembered the smell: of unwashed bodies, and urine, and fear. The despairing looks on the skeletal faces as she'd been dragged past. She tried to push the memories away and to keep talking, keep telling Edward what he needed to know.

"They used to take them out every day in chain gangs. Constantino had a ranch, and some of his deputies had places too, and the prisoners had to work to get fed. Not that they got much. I heard that after a month or so...." Her voiced cracked, the lump in her throat making her hoarse. She swallowed, trying to get herself under control. "After a month or so, people started dying. One of them'd catch a cold, and it'd go round that place, and every morning there'd be one, maybe two less of them...."

She was sniffing now, trying to hold back the hot tears that threatened to fall, but she kept on talking. "Most of the work was farm work, but there was a place they took them where they had to dig graves. Some for the people who died at the warehouse, and some ready for the next round of executions."

"Here."

A tissue appeared in front of her. Gratefully, she took it from Edward without looking him, and blew her nose.

"The women they took, they were made to do farm work, too, but I heard the young and pretty ones, they—." She stopped and looked up at Edward, and he nodded to show he knew what she was going to say, and she didn't have to finish the sentence. She swallowed and carried on talking. It was a relief to finally speak about it, and to someone who would just listen. Who wouldn't judge her for the part she'd played.

"When I first got there, I didn't know any of this. I—." She laughed bitterly. "They were really nice to me. I was going to show them how to make wind turbines, and they were going to get something new to trade. And I wasn't surprised they were full of questions about Jericho. I would've been too. I—I just didn't understand why they were asking at first. And I didn't see any reason not to answer."

Again she looked away, her gaze falling on where Jake and Jimmy were standing at the bar talking to Mary. New Bern thought she was a traitor. And if the people of Jericho found out about this, maybe they'd think she was a traitor too.

She looked back at Edward and shrugged. "I told them things weren't great, but that we were managing. That we had salt from the mine to trade. That we'd seen off Ravenwood." She shook her head. "They must have worked out for themselves that Goetz had gone straight from Jericho to New Bern."

"Not long after the men from Jericho arrived to help build the turbines, I started to hear people saying things about Jericho. That we were hoarding food. That we sicced Ravenwood on them. That Jericho wasn't going to keep up its end of the deal for the wind turbines. I don't know if Constantino was planning a war already, and what I told him just helped his plans along. Or if what I said gave him the idea."

Edward's mouth was set in a hard, angry line, but there was pity in his eyes as well anger. Heather found she was still clutching the tissue. She used it to wipe her eyes and blow her nose again, before dropping it in the saucer of her coffee cup.

"It's not your fault, you know." Edward's quiet assurance made her look back up at him. "Whatever

you told Constantino, everything that happened afterwards is on his head."

She gave a hiccuping laugh. "I know. It's just...."

He nodded. "I know. Even if we had the best of intentions at the time, it still doesn't stop us from blaming ourselves, does it?"

Heather stifled something that was halfway between a sob and a laugh. That had been the story of their lives—both their lives—ever since the bombs.

"And then you and Eric got caught sabotaging the factory?" When she nodded, he added, "But the deputy who was supposed to deal with you let you go."

She remembered telling him that back when they'd first met. They'd been sitting... not quite here, but nearby, and he'd asked her to be his liaison. Despite everything that had happened, she was glad she'd said yes.

She licked her lips. "The deputy who took me out to... where the graves were. He'd been a deputy before the attacks. He wasn't one of the thugs Constantino brought in after he got himself made Acting City Manager. This guy, he didn't like what Constantino was doing, but he was like the rest of us. He was too scared to speak up. And I guess he thought that by staying where he was, he might be able to do something to stop Constantino, at least a little."

"He did more than a little." Edward gave her an encouraging smile. "He saved your life."

She nodded. "He took me out to where the graves were, but when we got there, he let me go. Told me about a couple he knew, friends of his, who'd been part of one of Constantino's trading parties but wanted to leave town before the war started. Gave me their address and said he'd told them to expect me. They hid me in the trunk of their car and got me past the checkpoint. They were going to circle round and drop me off where I could walk back to Jericho in maybe two or three days. Except we got run off the road on I-80 by a road gang before they could do that."

"And we found you, and I got sent here...." Edward sounded like he was talking to himself.

Heather wondered if that made her responsible for the things he'd done, too. But, no, he'd said what other people did wasn't her fault. She did feel bad about Mark and Kathy, but they might have run foul of the road gang anyway. And there was something Edward needed to know, something she needed to make clear. She sought out his gaze and held it. "They're not bad people in New Bern. Mark and Kathy, the couple who got me out, I didn't know them very well, but they were good people. That deputy." She didn't want to name him; for all she knew, he was still in Constantino's inner circle. "He was a good man. The people in New Bern, they just got scared and hungry and...."

Edward nodded. "I know." He looked down at the table and flexed his hands. "I know," he repeatedly quietly. "There but for the grace of God...."

oOo

Jake had spent a frustrating morning trying to persuade the residents of Jericho to actually get on with making preparations for the various forms of assault they could face, instead of going over and over what the town *might* do. He gritted his teeth as he listened to people endlessly discussing how an attack like the last one surely couldn't get past Beck's patrol lines. That might be true enough, but repeating it didn't get them any closer to dealing with any of the things New Bern *could* still

manage to do. Every time Jake thought about how Russell had been able to make it all the way into Heather's bedroom—thought about how terrified she must have been—his blood boiled, and it became harder to deal with obtuse people who couldn't seem to grasp that, whatever New Bern was planning, it probably *wasn't* going to be like the last time.

Eventually, he couldn't stand being in City Hall any longer. He left Gray still arguing over where the fire marshalls would be stationed and headed to Bailey's with Jimmy to see if he could at least recruit some people for the duty roster. The place was packed with people eager to hear the latest news; Jake wished they'd show half as much enthusiasm for doing something about it.

His mood didn't improve when he spotted Beck sitting with Heather. He lost the thread of what he was saying as he explained to a group standing at the bar what being a fire marshall would involve. Pulling himself back to the task in hand, he managed to persuade a couple to sign up.

While they were adding their names to the list, he looked back at Heather and Beck. She seemed to be doing most of the talking, while Beck listened intently. As he watched, he saw Beck push a tissue across the table. Heather accepted it willingly enough and blew her nose, before she started speaking again, her face taut with misery.

Much as he disliked Beck, Jake didn't think it was something the major had said to Heather that had gotten her upset. Looked more like he was comforting her. Jake thought he could make a pretty good guess at what they were talking about.

The clipboard being thrust back into his hands pulled his attention away from them. Forcing himself to concentrate, he turned to Mary, who was watching him while she wiped a cloth up and down the bar. He cleared his throat self-consciously. "Look," he waved the clipboard, "Jimmy and I'll go round the bar and sign up who we can now, but maybe you could keep a copy and see if you can get anyone else who comes in later?"

Mary pursed her lips and gave him an annoyed look. "You want me to frighten off all my customers by trying to recruit them? One free fire duty with every beer?"

He blinked. "I—no. I just thought...."

"Oh go on." She rolled her eyes. "Hand it over when you're done. Not as if I'm likely to have any customers tomorrow if you don't get enough people signed up."

"Thanks, Mary." He gave her a quick grin. As he moved off, he reminded himself not to take her for granted. Just because she and Eric were shackled up, and she'd been helpful in a dozen small ways, didn't mean she didn't have her own interests to take care of. And he wasn't sure the town could function without Bailey's.

Glancing back again at Heather and Beck as he and Jimmy moved around the bar to the next group, he saw they were still talking. When he next had a chance to look, Beck was getting up and leaving. Heather continued sitting by herself, staring into space. Mumbling some excuse, Jake shoved the clipboard at Jimmy and headed for Heather's table.

"Hey. You okay?"

She looked up at him, clearly pulling herself from her thoughts with difficulty. She gave him a half-hearted smile. "I'm fine."

She obviously wasn't, but Jake let it slide for the moment. "Now's a good time for me to run you back out to the ranch if you....?"

"Sure." She pushed to her feet slowly. "Thanks." Again, her smile didn't quite reach her eyes.

With a hand on her back, he guided her through the crowded bar and out to where the Roadrunner was parked, a little way along Main Street. As he navigated them out onto Route 6, she sat stiffly in the passenger seat, staring straight ahead, her hands clasped around her purse.

"So what were you and Beck talking about?" He peered forwards, apparently concentrating on the road ahead as they passed the last houses straggling on the edge of town.

She took such a long time to answer that he didn't think she was going to. At last she sighed. "New Bern."

When she didn't elaborate, he glanced across and caught her eye. She gave a slight shrug. He looked back at the road. "You never really talked about it."

This time, he didn't get any reply. He snuck another look and saw she'd turned her head away. Even as he watched, she lifted her right hand to her cheek. He suspected she was trying to wipe away tears without letting him know she was crying. As he slowed for the turn to the ranch, he once again berated himself for letting her go to New Bern at all—and for not fetching her back when she hadn't returned with the first wind turbine.

Steering the car along the track to the house, he drew the Roadrunner up next to Charlotte and killed the engine.

She was already scrabbling for the door handle and muttering, "Thanks."

"Heather?"

She stopped. He saw her take a deep breath before she turned to face him. As he'd expected, her makeup was a little messed up.

He edged towards her slightly, but not so much he'd scare her. "I—."

She gave a small shake of the head. "Please, Jake. It was hard enough—." She stopped and swallowed.

He reached out and caught her hand and gave it a squeeze. "Hey, it's okay." It wasn't really; he hated that she'd confided in Beck and not him. That Beck knew things about her he didn't. But this wasn't about him.

She squeezed her eyes tight shut for a moment, another tear trickling out, and then opened them again and gave him a brave smile.

Somehow he'd managed to get hold of her other hand as well. He stroked her knuckles with his thumbs. "If you ever do feel like talking...."

"I know." It was her turn to squeeze his hands, her grip firm. She licked her lips, hesitating for a moment before she spoke again. "Edward, he... kinda caught me off guard. It wasn't that I wouldn't have told you when I was ready...." Her voice trailed off and she shrugged slightly.

He nodded silently, still irritated that Beck apparently had impeccable timing, whereas he seemed to be floundering around, always too late. Yet some of his dislike for Beck was smoothed away by her attempt to reassure him. He went on holding her hands in his, reluctant to let go.

After a moment, she gently pulled away, looking down at her hands as she twisted them together on top of her purse. "I should go."

He wanted to reach out for her again, but he pulled his hands back and shoved them under his arms as if trying to keep warm. "You okay to drive?"

She nodded without looking at him. Fumbling for the door, she climbed out.

When she'd managed to get Charlotte started—only a couple of unhappy rattles before the pickup turned over and caught—he got out as well. He leaned against the roof of the Roadrunner while she backed Charlotte up and drove off, lifting her hand to him as she passed.

Watching the pickup until it turned onto the road and disappeared out of sight, he cursed himself for letting Heather brush him off so easily when he'd asked her about New Bern months ago. It made him ache inside to think of her carrying that burden alone for all this time. No wonder she'd seemed sadder and less trusting and angrier....

They all were, of course; none of them had come through the last months unscathed. But he was struggling to connect the Heather who'd just left with the schoolteacher he'd met on that crashed bus: unquenchably optimistic, and full of bright ideas, and radiating love for the students who clearly adored her.

Climbing back into the Roadrunner, he reflected that he already had so many reasons to hate Phil Constantino that surely one more shouldn't matter. But it did.

oOo

The day passed in a blur of preparations until, finally, all they could do was wait for Eric, Russell and the others to return. Jake asked Mary to close the bar just before midnight. With help from Gray, Jimmy and Bill, they persuaded the hangers-on who'd come to hear the news to leave and go home. Jake wasn't expecting the rescue party to make it back to Beck's patrol lines until much later, but he didn't want this turning into any more of a circus than it already was.

Mary spent the time busing tables and tidying up behind the bar. Jake offered to help, but she waved him away, and he realized she needed to keep herself occupied to stop herself from worrying about Eric. Instead, he paced up and down the bar until, after about ten minutes his mother snapped frostily, "Jake, for goodness sake, sit down."

He subsided onto a stool, choosing one where he had to turn his head to see his mother and Emily sitting at one of the tables on the upper level. His mother had insisted on staying, claiming that someone needed to look after Russell's family when they arrived. Emily hadn't said anything, but he knew she and Chavez—well, he reckoned she'd want to know Chavez was safe. Mack was standing by their table, apparently exercising his Texan charm, which was just as well: both women's expressions whenever Jake made eye contact made the hours he'd spent stuck under Stanley's truck feel like a sunny afternoon in San Diego.

The stool was also a little way away from where Heather sat quietly, talking to Mary from time to

time. She still seemed sunk in on herself, like she was somewhere else entirely. When she'd first arrived, she'd looked horrified at the crush inside; Jake had hurried over and made sure she had somewhere to sit, and that no one would bother her—until he realized he was crowding her as well. He'd backed off, a few well-placed glares ensuring that Heather continued to be left alone. When the place emptied out, she moved to a stool at the bar.

He couldn't help but be glad that Beck had stationed himself some distance away from both of them, nearer the door; it still irked Jake that she'd confided in him.

The only other people in the bar were Gray, Jimmy and Bill. They hovered by the pool table, still looking at maps. Jake had no idea what they could be saying that hadn't been gone over a dozen times already, but it probably made them feel useful.

It was well after one in the morning when a corporal came over from City Hall to report that the checkpoint had radioed through: Eric and the others had made it back. Half an hour or more passed before those waiting inside the bar heard two humvees pull up outside. A minute later, Eric was pushing through the door, leading Russell. He was carrying a boy of about seven, who looked around with wide eyes at the group waiting to greet them. They were followed in by a thin, tired-looking woman whose prettiness had been scrubbed away with worry and time. She held a half-asleep, fair-haired girl in her arms. Chavez and Hank Jackson brought up the rear.

Gail was first to move, clucking over the children and guiding Russell and his wife to a booth in the far corner of the bar. Heather put out a hand to touch the woman's arm as she passed, smiling at her for a moment, and gave a little wave to the boy as Russell carried him by. Jake saw she was rewarded with an uncertain smile.

Jake turned and looked for Eric. That everyone had returned unscathed suggested things had gone well, but he wanted to hear what his brother had to say. He found him sharing a long hug with Mary. He hovered a little way away until they broke apart, and Mary went to offer something to eat and drink to Russell and his family.

Chavez and Hank were already digging into the sandwiches Mary had set on the counter. Beck joined the group as well as Jake slapped Eric on the arm. "Any trouble?"

Eric shook his head, grabbing a sandwich and a beer. "The diversion did the trick... we got past Hoffman's lines okay." He nodded his head at Beck as he bit into his sandwich. "Managed to keep moving slowly most of the day; only had to hide once, and we had an hour or so before dark to scout New Bern's patrols. Then we were in and out quick enough. Saw a helicopter once, and a couple humvees in the distance when we were on our way back, but they didn't spot us."

Jake let out the breath he'd been holding, relieved that things had been so easy. "Okay. So now it's time to find out whether it was worth it." He swung round and called Russell's name across the bar. Russell looked up and Jake inclined his head. "We got your family out. Now it's time to tell us what Constantino's up to."

Russell nodded and, with a parting touch on his wife's shoulder, came down into the main part of the bar. Gray, Jimmy and Bill left the pool table and crowded together at the end of the bar, while Russell positioned himself a little way along from where Heather sat. From where he stood, he could see everyone in the bar, all leaning towards him, eager to hear what he had to say. All, Jake noticed, except Heather, who had her head down and her hands tightly clasped in her lap. He turned his attention back to Russell.

Russell took a moment to look around at the company gathered about him, and then faced Jake again. He hesitated, before saying quietly, "Constantino's looking to cut the head off the snake." When Jake raised an eyebrow, wondering quite what that meant, Russell opened his hands, urging Jake to wait for the explanation. "Tomorrow, after midnight, he's going to send squads into Jericho to take out its leaders. Jake, Eric, Gray." Russell looked at each of them as he spoke their names.

Behind him, Jake could hear a little gasp from his mom as both her sons were named, but he kept his attention focused on Russell. It wasn't quite what he'd expected from Constantino, but it wasn't a complete surprise, either.

Russell looked around, as if checking the group again, and then looked back at Jake. "Hawkins, too. Constantino hasn't forgotten what he did when he got you and Eric out of New Bern and blew up the factory."

Jake nodded. "So, how—?"

"There'll be simultaneous raids on the Green house in town, the ranch out on Route 6, Gray's place in The Pines, and Hawkins' home. Anyone found at any of those places will be killed."

Jake swallowed. His mom and Emily would have been alone at the house. For a moment, he regretted moving out, but now wasn't the time to think about what he should or shouldn't have done. He had to stay focused on what they were going to do.

Russell had turned toward Eric. "Bailey's is going to be firebombed. Not just in hopes of killing you, but also to cause maximum confusion. There's two reasons for that. One," he nodded towards where Beck was standing paying close attention, "is to try and lure Major Beck into town so a team can ambush him on his way in. The other is to cover the escape of a special squad. Their objective is to get hold of Heather and get her back to New Bern. Alive." He turned and looked down the bar at her. She'd lifted her head and there was an almost weary look on her face. "Constantino has... special plans for her."

"What sort of special plans?" Beck's soft question fell into the sudden shocked silence.

Russell looked back at the major. Jake could see a muscle in his jaw twitching. "You don't want to know. Let's just say he's not planning on throwing her a birthday party."

oOo

Heather had known as soon as Russell began to list Constantino's targets that she'd be among them somewhere, and she wasn't much surprised that she was being singled out for more than a straightforward assassination. It fit with the bounty Constantino had placed on her head months ago. What troubled her was the way the others seemed so much more bothered by Constantino's plans for her than for anyone else. Apart from that little gasp from Gail—entirely understandable—they'd had taken the rest of the news calmly enough. So why was she suddenly the focus of everyone's attention? Sure, Constantino might have *special plans* for her, and she'd said herself that the people he'd executed were the lucky ones. But not that lucky: they were still dead.

Edward, looking past Russell, caught her eye; even from a distance she saw a mixture of anger and concern in his expression that disconcerted her. Looking away from him, she encountered Jake's unhappy gaze, which was no better. She looked down at her hands, clasped together in her lap, and then back up at Russell.

"So what do we do to stop him?" Her voice fell loudly into the silence, and she was surprised how steady it sounded.

Russell shrugged. "Try and pick them up before they reach town? Make sure they don't find anyone they're looking for if they do make it in?"

"What route are they coming in on?" Eric was wiping the dust of the trip from his face with a damp cloth.

Russell shook his head. "I don't know. Constantino was pretty free with talking about what the squads would do when they got to town, but the rest of the details.... It was something he and Marshall and Perkins planned between them. I wasn't in on that. For all I know, they could've been infiltrating teams behind your lines for days."

Heather had seen from the corner of her eye that Jake had slouched back against the railings surrounded the upper level of the bar, hands in his pockets, but now his head shot up. "They could be here already?" His eyes were blazing.

Russell nodded. "Maybe."

Like a rattlesnake striking, Jake leaped forward and grabbed Russell by the front of his shirt, shoving his face close to the other man's. "And you knew Heather was going to be kidnapped, and you let her—you let *us* let her carry on walking around on her own?"

"Jake!" Heather jumped off her stool and grabbed his arm, trying to pull him away from Russell. "It's okay. It's—."

He turned his head and looked down at her. Something in her expression must have gotten through the fury she saw in his face. Reluctantly, he let go of Russell, thrusting him away, and took a step back.

Heather followed him, her hand still on his arm. She gave him a weak smile. "Even if they are here, they're not going to do anything until tomorrow night, are they? Russell knew I was safe until then."

"Maybe." Jake glowered down at her, apparently still unconvinced. "And maybe if they get the chance, they won't wait." He seized hold of her shoulders. "You drove out to the ranch. On your own. In the middle of the night—." There was an edge of panic in his voice.

"Hey, it's okay." She squeezed his arm and gave him a more confident smile. "I'm still here. They didn't get me."

"I just—." She saw him swallow. "You barely escaped last time. I don't—."

Heather gave his arm another squeeze and stepped back. "I know. But now we know what Constantino's up to, we can stop him."

Jake nodded. "Okay." He took a deep breath. "Okay. We need to make sure everyone's safe. And then maybe we can ambush them once they get into town." He looked over at Eric. "Concentrate our forces where we know they're going to be."

Heather took another step back and reached for the bar to steady herself as the others began to make

plans. Russell's news was finally starting to sink in: Constantino was about to try and make good on the threats he'd made when she and Eric had gotten caught at the factory.

In the months since then, since she'd returned to Jericho, she'd managed to convince herself that what had happened in New Bern was in her past, something she could put behind her. But here it was again, reaching out to engulf her, to engulf Jericho. Maybe she should have let Jake talk her out of leaving for New Bern with Ted and Russell and Mike after they'd met up with them at Black Jack. Maybe then none of this would have happened. But she'd been so sure that going to New Bern would help.

Her eyes felt hot with unshed tears. All she'd wanted to do was turn the lights back on for everyone. And instead, she'd brought them this.

oOo

Beck had stayed on the fringes of the discussion; once Jake and Eric had decided that ambushing the New Bern men after they got into town was the best course of action, he didn't have much to add. The plan made sense: there was no way they could be sure of picking up the teams on their way in. Although he was formulating a few plans of his own for stepping up his patrols

After a while, the group began to break up. Beck saw Russell turn to Heather and say something to her. He couldn't hear the words, but Heather's reaction was very clear: she went white as a sheet and swayed on her feet.

"Heather?" He was at her side in a couple of strides, catching her under the elbow and guiding her to a bar stool. He glared up at Russell. "What did you say to her?"

Russell shrugged, looking embarrassed. "I just told her that Constantino caught Ted."

"Ted Lewis?" Beck hadn't even realized Jake had followed him until the other man spoke.

Russell nodded.

Beck still had his hand on Heather's back, supporting her, and he felt her shivering. Looking around, he caught sight of the person he was searching for. "Mary." He beckoned her towards them. "We need a shot of whiskey."

Mary took one look at Heather and quickly busied herself pouring the drink without comment. While he waited for her to push it across the bar, Beck glanced sideways at Jake and murmured, "Who's Ted Lewis?"

"Friend of Heather's." Jake shook his head, his expression grim "Helped us find out what happened to Heather and Eric after they were caught sabotaging the factory."

Russell cleared his throat. "Seems he'd been hiding out at a hunting cabin outside of town. He must've run out of food and decided to risk sneaking back in."

Beck put the whiskey into Heather's hands. "Here. Drink."

She closed her eyes and tossed back the shot. The color had started to come back into her face; when she opened her eyes, she sought out Russell. "What did Constantino do to him?" Her voice was a little raw; Beck wasn't sure if it was the whiskey or emotion

Russell spread his hands in a despairing gesture. "He had him executed. I'm sorry, Heather. I know you two were close."

Heather pressed her lips together. Reaching out blindly, she set the shot glass back on the bar, pushing it silently in Mary's direction. The other woman didn't need any further prompting to provide a refill.

"Are you sure he's dead?" Jake's question drew both Beck's and Russell's attention away from Heather for a moment. Jake shrugged. "It's just that when Constantino threw Eric in prison, he told him he'd had Heather executed. And...." He gestured at the very-much-alive Heather.

Russell shook his head. "I'm sure." He looked back at Heather. "Constantino held a public execution, front of City Hall. Hanged him."

Heather wrapped her arms around herself and shuddered. Beck's own gut wrenched at the thought, and he hadn't even known the man. He couldn't imagine what Heather was feeling.

Russell looked up at Beck and Jake. "Constantino made this big speech. About how Ted was a traitor. About how the same thing was going to happen to all traitors to New Bern."

He didn't need to say any more. Beck knew exactly what he meant, and by the increased tension he felt from Jake, he knew he did too. He just hoped Heather—.

"And that's what Constantino's going to do to me?" Heather's voice was surprisingly composed, and Beck could only marvel again at her strength.

Russell was still for a moment, and then he nodded.

"That's not going to happen." Jake stepped forward and put his hand on Heather's shoulder. When she looked up at him, he added fiercely. "We're not gonna let that happen, okay?"

Jake glanced up and caught Beck's gaze over the top of Heather's head. Beck gave him the slightest of nods. They might not see eye to eye on much, but on this they were in complete agreement.

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